

Luck of the Pot
Potluck Recipes
and
Tales of Friendship & Laughter
By Hazel Fluke

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Table of Contents:

[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dianne: My Friends Mean the World to Me](#)

[Christine: A Non-Traditionalist](#)

[Cathy O: Learn, Grow, and Share the Wisdom](#)

[Carol: A Celebration of Motherhood](#)

[Laurel: The Joys of Friendships](#)

[Barb: A Road Free to Wander](#)

[Gloria: My Reminder of What's Important](#)

[Karen: A Career Path Pattern](#)

[Cathy M: For the Love of Laughter](#)

[Hazel: Discovering My Chosen Profession](#)

[Debbie: Patience Rewards](#)

[Us: How We Combine](#)

[Recipe Index](#)

Foreword

Although I did not go to school with her, in many ways I am one of Hazel's school friends. The difference is that when we met I was in Grade Nine and she was Miss Fluke, my homeroom teacher. But just like the women in this book we spent lunchtimes going over the happenings of the day, we enjoyed the same school activities (Senior Band), and we had our own series of silly inside jokes that sent us into peals of laughter. Our commonalities and enjoyment of each other carried our friendship through my high school days, past graduation, and into my adulthood. Our relationship remains exactly as it was. We still meet to go over the daily news and laugh until our sides hurt and our eyes water and everyone else in the restaurant thinks we are nuts!

It is for these reasons that I agreed to be the editor for this book: the record of a beautiful set of friendships that I have been hearing about for years, and which was written with great love and care. It has been rewarding to work through these stories and recipes with Hazel, to gain a greater understanding of her friends and friendship, but also to uncover a different aspect of ours. Not long after we started to work together I realized that my style of editing was not what Hazel had been expecting. The comments I left in text bubbles alongside her stories – which ranged from copyediting to vocabulary choice, to full and lengthy conversations about the narrative thread of a paragraph – were unexpected but received with grace, enthusiasm, and work. The beating heart of this project has always been Hazel's admiration and devotion to the group of women she writes about. As our text bubble conversations developed what became most clear was how dedicated she was to getting each story 'just right'. Her willingness to trust in my unconventional (or maybe just unexpected) editing style came down to her commitment to her group, her ladies, and doing the very best for them and their stories. I always knew Hazel was a good friend (she has shown me that over and over again) and I have always known about the 'potluck' crew, but it wasn't until this project that I had tangible evidence of how really devoted she is.

And so I thank you Hazel for giving us a chance to add a layer to our friendship. I would happily work with you again. And I thank you, Potluck Ladies, for sharing your seemingly ordinary lives. And to you I would also say – you are very lucky to have one

another after all these years, and now to have tangible proof of how important your stories and friendships are to one of your own.

May 8, 2014

Ashley Williamson

Editor

[back to top](#)

Introduction

We grew up together. Not as sisters of the same family, but as sisters of the same *joie de vivre*.

We enjoy and indulge in our shared childhood memories. Our love and support of one another is strong and unwavering. When one laughs, we all laugh. When one weeps, we all weep. Yet, our collective spirit is comprised of a lovely mix of lives, each rich with her own tale spun from a lifetime of experience.

Luck of the Pot celebrates our lives both together and apart. The phrase ‘luck of the pot,’ is based on the origin of the meaning behind ‘potluck,’ where participants bring dishes to a dinner, to be shared by everyone. In some definitions, the idea of potluck is derived from each participant bringing a particular ingredient to be added to a communal pot, from which a meal is prepared.

Potluck dinners became an important staple of our identity as a group. Our regular gatherings over a potluck dinner began when our regular gatherings for each others’ bridal showers were complete. Bridal showers began the very year after our high school graduation; and, one followed another in fairly rapid succession. At a shower, we’d surprise the bride of the moment with gifts, after which we would enjoy the array of dishes each of us contributed. But we ran out of bridal showers before we ran out of the desire to meet and eat together.

The solution was self-evident. We didn’t need the excuse of a shower to meet. It was as if we looked at each other during one of those showers and had our collective ‘aha’ moment: “Let’s just make a date for dinner together, and we’ll all contribute a potluck dish.” We made note of the date, and a tradition was born.

With the birth of our new tradition, and long before this ebook was created, we were already ‘writing the book’ on potluck dinners and enduring friendships. The recipe is simple. First and only ingredient: Desire. Prepare a potluck dish of your choosing. No need to consult. No need to plan for a theme. No need to avoid duplication. Bring a bottle of wine, if you wish, but never fear there’ll be a shortage. Arrive with your dish at the home of the hostess. Pour yourself a glass of wine. Laugh. Eat. Laugh some more. Share stories. At the end of the evening – and we can’t stress this enough – get your date book and have everyone look at their calendars and set the next date and location.

Frequency may vary. The time interval for us is about every two to four months, or four to five times a year.

We reckon we have ‘true’ potlucks. There is nothing planned or dictated about our chosen dishes. We playfully mock other groups who ‘pretend’ to have a potluck dinner, only to assign to each participant exactly what she should bring. Not us. We may come together for our ‘communal pot,’ but each contribution is as individual as each of us is – even when we prepare the ‘same’ dish. We never fret over whether or not we will achieve enough variety. And with eleven of us, variety is always on the menu.

As most will agree, it is easy to lose touch with school friends who go separate ways after graduation. We may have been lucky with the timing of weddings after high school, as they brought us together time and time again. That we continued the tradition of potluck dinners – long after the last bridal shower – is not a matter of luck, but rather design. For 40 years and counting, we have made our potluck tradition a priority by always ensuring that no one leaves one dinner before we know the date of the next one.

It is in the spirit of our potluck dinners that this ebook was conceived. For each of us, there is a chapter, which tells her story, followed by her chosen recipe. In this manner, we are the ingredients, which combine in that communal pot, which then becomes *us*. And yes, the communal pot *becomes* us.

[back to top](#)

Dianne: My Friends Mean the World to Me

W.H. Ballard Elementary School. Grades 7 and 8. School zoning. It was all explained in the letter. But for me, it may have just as easily been a letter that read, “Dianne, you have been sentenced to two years of solitary confinement, during which you will have no access to all the friends you have grown up with at A.M. Cunningham School.”

My offence? I lived on the wrong side of Kenilworth. Cunningham was a school, which covered kindergarten through Grade 6. I was happy at Cunningham. It was the place where I made many friends – friends who lived on the *right* side of Kenilworth. After our Grade 6 graduation, it seemed to me that my friends – my whole world – were about to be lost to me forever. And for an 11-year-old, two years *is* forever.

When I look back on that critical moment in my elementary school experience, I now see that this two-year separation was a kind of clarion call sounding the tone for the role of friends in my future. At Ballard, I made new friends. They were friends I played with at recess, sat next to in the classroom, or shared a laugh with after school. They were my Ballard friends, keeping me company while I was at Ballard.

But I was counting the days. For two years, I waited for the moment I would be reunited with my Cunningham friends at the start of high school. And when that day finally arrived, my world was set right again. Little did I know, that this group of friends, the ones I learned to appreciate even more during our separation, would be the source of strength I was about to need so desperately in the years to come.

I live with a deep appreciation for friends and it was a lesson that I would eventually teach my own children. We may not have great family recipes and I may be lacking in the culinary arts, but that did not mean I had no legacy to pass on to my children. For example, as soon as each of them learned the concept of friendship, I taught them to cherish and nurture their friends. I would tell them that friends are supportive, that they’ll be there for you, that they will share with you the many emotions of your life: happiness, excitement, fear, distress, sadness, or joy. Everything in their lives will be better because they have friends who love them. And they must never take a warm circle of caring friends for granted. I feel blessed that I met and married my loving husband, George, and that we have two beautiful, healthy and happy children, Stephen and

Michelle. Healthy, happy children need healthy, happy parents. I question that that would have been the case for me, had I not had my warm circle of caring friends with me throughout high school and beyond.

Shortly after I started high school, my mother had a series of strokes, which left her severely physically disabled and with significant short-term memory loss. My dad loved her deeply and did not want to see her end up in a care institution and so he moved mountains to keep her at home. Those sacrifices included his working the night shift so that he could take care of her during the day. But it also meant that my mom's care became the responsibility of my sister and me at the end of our school day, when my dad left for work. My sister, who is nearly two years older, worked a part-time job after school to make money to pay for her future education. We both took care of our mother, but it was when my dad and my sister were at work that I felt the weight of this responsibility at its heaviest.

These were trying times for me. Instead of participating in the world of high school clubs and sports, I would come straight home after school to tend to my mother's needs – a mother who couldn't remember a conversation we had within minutes of having it. My mother passed away before my senior year at high school.

It was while my family life was crumbling beneath me that my friends became my rock. They rallied around me, they kept me company, and many were the occasions where I found myself seated at their family dinner tables. More than ever, I took refuge in the strength I felt from my friends. But, grief was different for my dad. The loss left him feeling deeply saddened with an unbearable loneliness. And so he very soon remarried.

My new stepmother may have been anxious to be a wife, but she was not interested in being a mother to two new teenage daughters. And she was not shy about making her feelings known. This made for a very stressful household, which was particularly hard on my dad. He wanted their marriage to work. He needed it. My older sister, now in college and dating her future husband, moved in with his family. That was her solution for keeping peace with our dad. My solution was to move into my own apartment, even though I still had one year left of high school.

Maintaining an apartment – albeit shared with a roommate – meant working part-time to pay for rent and food and once I completed high school I got my first full time job. It was at work that I met my future husband. I was the bookkeeper of a pizza restaurant and sometimes I'd work the counter. One day a handsome young man walked in to apply for the position of driver for their delivery service. I turned to my boss and said, "Hire him!" They did. And within four years, George and I were married.

George was my perfect match. We shared the same family values, pursued common life goals, and – very important – he liked my friends and they liked him. George would soon be witness to the love and support that radiates from my friends.

George and I made plans. Once he graduated from Police College and became a full time police officer, we would start our family. Becoming a good and loving mother was important to me, no doubt because of what I felt I missed throughout my teenage years. When we suffered three miscarriages, I grieved deeply. My friends were there not only for me, but now they were also there for George. They reached out with phone calls, visits, cards, and oven-ready meals as they rallied again, sometimes sharing tears with me, but ever ready to lend me strength during these devastating losses. For us, knowing we had the support of this wonderfully positive group of women helped us tremendously.

We did not give up on our dreams. Stephen was our first blessing, and Michelle came along shortly after to complete our loving family.

Stephen now enjoys a career in the military, where just like me he has experienced how the camaraderie of friends is essential, and in dangerous situations, even life saving. He has a family of his own now enjoying life with his best friend and her beautiful son and together they recently introduced us to my first grandson, a welcome and adorable addition to our family.

Last summer Michelle married the love of her life. She and I had worked together on the bride's side of the guest list. My heart nearly burst with happiness and pride because there were two very special tables on our list: One was my potluck friends, who have been my lifeline throughout all my days. The other was Michelle's own "potluck" friends, destined to be for her what my friends have been and continue to be for me.

My legacy is complete.

* * *

The recipe I am sharing is for “Hot Crab/Shrimp Dip.” I wish I could say that I have a recipe that I have created out of experience in the kitchen, but I don’t see that happening anytime soon. So, this one is from a trusted source, which I have made with solid success.

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HOT CRAB/SHRIMP DIP

2 pkgs 8 oz cream cheese

1 tin shrimp (drain)

1 tin crab (drain)

1 cup Miracle Whip Salad Dressing

2 cups grated old cheddar cheese

2 tbsp dill weed

1/2 tbsp onion flakes

Round loaf bread of choice.

Mix all together (hand mixer)

Hollow out bread. Stuff bread with mixture. Wrap loaf in foil covering bread but leaving an opening.

Bake at 325 F for 1 1/2 hours.

Serve hot out of oven with bread or Frito Scoops to dip

[back to top](#)

Christine: A Non-Traditionalist

The justice of the peace turned to my newly pronounced husband and said, “You may kiss the bride.” I turned to the JP and asked, “And may I kiss the groom?”

The funny thing about tradition is that when it doesn’t stand to reason, the only ones supporting it are those who benefit from it. How can you tell? Ask them “*why?*” Their answer is, “*It’s tradition.*”

Growing up, I learned to look beyond tradition and plan according to what made sense (not that I was always able to see what made sense at the time). Take for example, my decision to become a dentist. It made perfect sense, though I didn’t see it at first. In fact, it took an interesting remark from a caring high school teacher to help me see it. She had asked her students what their career plans were, and on my turn, I told her I was interested in a sports-related profession. Mrs. S. looked surprised. “Oh... Christine, I always thought you’d be a doctor or a lawyer.” That startled reaction planted a seed in the back of my mind. And for a seed of an idea to survive, it needs two elements: past experience to let the idea take root and an open mind to recognize when it is ready to grow.

I did well in my early years at Memorial School and when I got the invitation in Grade 6 to apply for a special enrichment class for Grade 7 and 8, I was quite happy to attend, even though it was at Queen Mary School, away from the friends I made at Memorial.

This Grade 7 and 8 program was a wonderful experience for me. Of course I met some great new classmates, which became lasting friendships. But also, the approach to learning suited me. Breaking the tradition of formal classroom style, students were given freedom to learn independently through a number of creative means, like using art projects to depict a history lesson or spending an afternoon in the library to research and prepare a dramatic presentation to demonstrate a science concept. By the time I began high school, I was becoming more and more aware of how important it was not to be boxed in by narrow visions of what *should* be.

As a teenager, when you first appreciate that you can be anything you choose to be, there is a tendency to try out a number of ideas – at least, that was true for me. For example, I thought of being a language teacher, so I took a German class. My classmates

were of German descent, and without any personal background, it wasn't long before I questioned my own devotion to the language. I enjoyed sports in high school, so much so, that I looked into pursuing a career in athletics. Eventually I questioned that path when I observed how my enjoyment of sports was no match for the athletic prowess of the students aiming for professional status, after years of hard training.

And then there was this seed of that idea: a doctor or a lawyer, she said. With that inspiration in mind, I decided to enter the sciences at University where the time would come for me to test the idea. Perhaps it was years of visits at the orthodontist's office while I wore braces, which influenced me to consider becoming a dentist. Should I make this my goal?

My way of testing the idea was to apply to write the entry exam, even before I had completed my first year in the sciences program. I was quite aware that I hadn't yet been taught many of the theoretical aspects covered in the exam and that I had little chance of passing, but I was more interested in the aptitude aspect. Was I suited to be a dentist? Yes, as it turned out, I possessed the manual dexterity and other skill sets required of a dentist. I did a lot of sewing when I was younger and I was quite good on the saxophone in high school. I had plenty of related experience working with my hands. My test results: I will study to be a dentist!

Along the way, I dated Jim. He and I met in our first year of University, even before I had decided on being a dentist. It wasn't as if I knew when I met him, that one day he would become my husband – that idea would get tested, too.

We were very compatible and our dating relationship was great. The challenge was a common one – overcoming the times and distances when we were apart as we each pursued our own university and career paths. The longest time and greatest distance was my first working year. To gain experience – while paying down my student debt – I accepted a salaried position working in Calgary at a city-run health and dental clinic.

When my one-year contract was up, I returned home to find out with certainty if our relationship had a future. With time and distance no longer obstacles, suddenly readiness became a concern. We gave our discussion of the future serious attention, comparing our dreams and visions. Jim felt he wasn't ready. He could not envision himself in our combined future. He suggested we end it. Two weeks later, I came by his apartment to

gather some personal possessions. When I got there, Jim greeted me with, “Christine, will you marry me?”

Jim has a way of reflecting on a situation, and coming to the right conclusion. His career and education in business probably put this skill to good use. Our home and family life really benefited from it. Our married life started out with Jim climbing the corporate ladder in Toronto, and me establishing my own dental practice just north of Toronto. And when we were ready, we started our family. After Brittney was born, my “pregnancy leave” lasted two weeks before I returned to running the dental business that I alone was responsible for.

With the two of us working full time, we kept to a tight schedule to make sure that Brittney’s needs were met. Jim saw to it that Brittney made it to and from day care while I made myself available to her for breastfeeding. It was an exhausting schedule, but it was necessary if both Jim and I were to maintain our respective careers. Jim’s reflecting skills went into action. He concluded that I should keep on developing the business I clearly loved and he should no longer miss out on his daughter’s milestones. So by the time Brittney was ten months old, he suggested he take a leave from work to look after Brittney and run the household full time.

I agreed. Once again, he had come to the right conclusion for all of us.

Blake came along within a couple of years, and new traditions continued evolving in our home. Jim never did return to the corporate ladder-climbing, much to the gratitude of his family. Instead, he ran our household as successfully as any corporate executive runs a business. Our house was kept clean, organized, and in good maintenance, while our landscaping attracted many compliments for his work. He cooks and bakes like a professional, too. Jim is a wonderful father who has spent more time with his kids than most dads could ever hope to. All this from a man who answered “It’s tradition” when I asked him why I shouldn’t keep my own last name after marriage.

I built and run a dental business which I am very proud of and part of my success is owed to the fact that I married well. I know that I can maintain high standards in my practice and be confident that our home life is maintained with equal integrity.

Our lifestyle might not be a traditional one, but it is one that sure makes sense to us.

* * *

I chose a recipe that Jim has made with rave reviews. I am a health enthusiast (okay, a health nut) and care about eating right and exercising. That is not to say I don't appreciate desserts. In fact, I have a reputation for bringing desserts to potluck dinners.

The recipe is called "Chocolate Quinoa Cake." and what I like about it is how it takes a classic dessert and adds an element of healthy eating.

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CHOCOLATE QUINOA CAKE

2/3 cup (160 ml) white quinoa

1 1/3 cup (330 ml) water

1/3 cup (80 ml) milk

4 eggs

1 tsp (5 ml) vanilla extract

3/4 cup (185 ml) unsalted butter

1 1/2 cups (375 ml) sugar

1 cup (250 ml) cocoa powder

1/2 tbsp (7 ml) baking powder

1/2 tbsp (7 ml) baking soda

1/2 tsp (2.5 ml) salt

Combine quinoa and water in a pot. Heat to simmer, cover and cook until quinoa is soft and has absorbed all the water, about 18 minutes. Spread flat to cool. Should produce about 2 cups (500 ml).

Start with all ingredients at room temperature. Preheat oven to 350 F/180 C.

In a food processor, combine quinoa, milk, eggs, vanilla and butter. Blend until smooth, about 5 minutes, scraping down sides halfway. Add sugar, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda and salt and puree 2 more minutes.

Pour into 9-inch silicone cake mould (or a similar-sized cake mould, greased). Bake for 25 minutes, rotate and continue another 25 minutes.

The top should spring back when touched. A toothpick will come out sticky, but dark, not shiny.

Rest in pan for ten minutes before removing. Set cake upside down on wire rack to cool.

Chocolate Frosting:

1 cup (250 ml) unsalted butter
6 oz. dark chocolate (about 1 cup, 250 ml of chips)
1 3/4 cups (435 ml) icing sugar sifted
1 tsp (5 ml) vanilla extract
1 tbsp (15 ml) milk
Pinch of salt

Start with all ingredients at room temperature. In a stand mixer fitted with paddle attachment, cream butter until soft. Add icing sugar in two batches and cream on medium speed until light and fluffy, about five minutes, scraping down sides halfway. Melt chocolate. You can put it in the microwave for 1 minute, stirring, letting the residual heat finish the melting. Or stir it over a double-boiler for 1 minute. Cool until warm to the touch.

Gradually add chocolate to mixer, scraping sides. Once incorporated, add vanilla, milk and salt and mix until smooth.

Spread frosting evenly over cake.

Store at room temperature for up to 2 days, refrigerate for 5 days or freeze indefinitely.

Makes 8 reasonably sized slices of cake.

[back to top](#)

Cathy O: Learn, Grow, and Share the Wisdom

覆水盆に返らず

I am not fluent in Japanese, but my grandparents had a saying: *Fukusui bon ni kaerazu*. Roughly translated, it means, what's done is done. There is no changing the past, so forget about it and move on. My grandparents were the embodiment of forward-thinkers, who lived their lives guided by a powerful moral compass. As a child, I knew this implicitly by their actions. As an adult, I learned the very depth of this sage advice. Yet, I would go a step further: It's true that we cannot change the past and it's true that dwelling on regrets offer no value, but it's also true that we can learn from the past to make a better future.

I grew up surrounded by a large, loving, extended family, which included my grandparents and two of their daughters. Their third daughter, my mother, was largely absent from my life and I never knew my father or any of his relatives. He died on the day I was born. He was 30 years old. That was all I knew of him, other than he was a handsome man and kind gentleman. It is easy to understand why my mother was attracted to him.

*

"Cathy, we're your cousins and we'd like to speak with you." They were my dad's relatives, and the whole time I was growing up, getting married and raising my own family, I had never met them, so it was curious why they called me now. Although they were my cousins, they were also complete strangers, but because they said it was important, I agreed to the meeting.

I welcomed my new cousins into my home and offered them tea. They seemed nervous and quite frankly, I was nervous, too. My head was swirling with jumbled thoughts of what they could possibly want to discuss after a lifetime without so much as an introduction.

As we exchanged pleasantries, my mind wandered to the time, a few years earlier, when another relative called me *out of the blue*. She was my half-sister, she told me on the phone. I wasn't totally unaware that my mother had turned to another man, an older man with questionable morals – at least I came to learn of this later in my life. My mother did not possess the coping skills to deal with the death of her husband. People

deal with life differently even when they have access to the same wisdom, like my mother and my aunts had with their parents. But it was indeed a surprise, a secret kept by my mother that she gave birth to another girl – my half sister. I felt a little sorry for her because she grew up without the love and warmth of her extended family and that new relationship never really took hold. We met. She asked a lot of questions. And I was never to see her again. I don't think she found what she was looking for, whatever that was.

So, why are my cousins here, I wondered. Are they going to pepper me with questions, and then leave, too?

Once they gathered their courage, they began with what seemed a lesson in biology and they were surprised at how easily I understood the terminology (I am a certified microbiologist). They went on to say that they had been genetically tested and found they had a CDH1 gene mutation.

Humans have about 30,000 genes in each of our cells. Everyone has two copies of the CDH1 gene – one from our mother, and one from our father. If one of these CDH1 genes has a mutation, then the person has hereditary diffuse gastric cancer syndrome. The prognosis is quite certain. There is an 83 percent chance of getting stomach cancer and a 40 percent chance of breast cancer. The breast and colon can be monitored with mammogram and MRI annually, along with an annual colonoscopy. But the stomach cannot. The cancer lies in the mucosal layer and cannot be detected by current methods. The only way to avoid stomach cancer is to have the stomach removed as a prophylactic measure.

In the span of this one conversation, my cousins went from strangers to family: Not only because we are related, but because they made the choice to seek me out, reach out to me, and offer me life-saving knowledge. Of course they were urging me to have the genetic testing. They could have just as easily ignored me. I was touched by the thoughtfulness of these members of my “new” family.

As it turned out, I did have the CDH1 gene mutation, as did my father, who had inherited it from his mother, the grandmother that my cousins and I shared. They may have been absent my whole life, but they contacted me when it mattered most. I couldn't

change the fact that I had inherited this gene, but I did have the choice to make a better future.

*

When I made the decision to have my stomach surgically removed, my friends called me “brave.” But being brave is not the way to describe what I was doing. I was choosing *life*.

I was choosing *life* because I looked around at my beautiful family. A husband I planned to grow old with. A daughter whose wedding I planned to attend. A son whose amazing career I planned to watch.

And in some deeper sense, I was choosing *life* because my grandparents had shown me how. My aunts – my “mothers” really – told me the story of them and their parents only a few years earlier.

My grandparents had five children, two sons and three daughters, and lived in British Columbia prior to the Second World War. They thrived and were successfully raising a family. In fact, my grandmother was a leader in the community, innovating methods to improve on the efficiencies of the local farm producers. A forward-thinker!

Like many Japanese families, my grandparents were ordered to move into a Canadian internment camp as a “temporary” measure during World War II following the attack by Imperial Japan at Pearl Harbor. When the war ended, they had none of their property returned to them, all of it having been auctioned off by the government. Furthermore, in spite of being Canadian citizens they were given a choice of deportation to Japan, or relocation east in Canada. They chose Ontario.

Guided by their moral compass, they encouraged all their children to get an education which would be the key to their success because what’s done is done and it was time to move on. My mother met my father at college, and they married soon after. My father was welcomed into the family and they all lived together in one big house in the west end of Hamilton.

The death of my father set my mother on a path of destruction. My mother’s new boyfriend had a very negative influence on her and together they made some poor and damaging decisions. They managed to legally manipulate the sale of our home, with the

proceeds going to the two of them. My grandparents and my two aunts took me and moved us to a smaller and more affordable house in another part of the city.

I remember having loads of fun playing in the corridors and passageways of that big old house. For a child under the age of seven, a big house can hold many secret little hideaways, great fodder for a child's imagination. But once we were moved in to our new home, I discovered the joys of this new neighbourhood, as well. I grew up with love and I was happy wherever we were – happy to discover what life had to offer, always beginning from where I stood.

I believe there is something to learn at every bend along the paths of our lives. Though I am aware that the events of my life are unique (few have experienced life without a stomach), my goal remains the same. Learn from it, share the wisdom, and then move on to discover the new.

“Fukusui bon ni kaerazu.”

* * *

My recipe is one that I have named “Mom’s Ice Cream Pie.” It is from a collection of recipes that I gathered, tested, and customized with the intention of passing them on to my daughter. *Mom’s Ice Cream Pie* is one of my favourites of this collection. It shows how we can take the very best from recipes we are introduced to, build on those successes, and create a whole new tasty delight.

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MOM’S ICE CREAM PIE

Crust:

1/2 cup peanut butter

1/2 cup corn syrup

2 cups Rice Krispies

Melt peanut butter and corn syrup together.

Stir in Rice Krispies.

Press into bottom and sides of a 9” pie plate.

Cool.

Filling:

Ice cream softened (takes about 1/2 hour if left in the fridge)

Nutella (chocolate-hazelnut spread)

Peanuts

2 Crispy Crunch Bars (refrigerated)

melted chocolate or sundae topping

Spread softened ice cream in pie crust until half filled.

Freeze pie overnight.

Spread Nutella over frozen ice cream.

Sprinkle peanuts over Nutella.

Freeze pie overnight.

(Pie will be 1/2 to 2/3 complete)

The next day, fill to the top with softened ice cream.

Pour melted chocolate over top.

Finely chop chocolate bars and sprinkle over the melted chocolate.

Freeze.

[back to top](#)

Carol: A Celebration of Motherhood

It is the Friday before the Victoria Day long weekend, and yet I can't wait until Tuesday. That's when I'll see her for the first time in nearly 20 years. She replied to my letter by email, "Hi Carol. It was great to hear from you. I'd love to get together with you. Looking forward, Liz." Just thinking about our reunion fills me with the sense of support and empowerment that I have come to associate with *Coach Liz*. Does she even know the influence she had on the course of my life, never mind just my life – the lives of 50 families or more? Was it enough to include, "special thanks to our coach Liz," with the birth announcement of each of our four children? I can't imagine that she could possibly know the extent to which she touched my life. When we meet for dinner on Tuesday night, I will only be able to begin to tell her how she inspired my work as a doula.

I grew up the youngest in my family. I had no baby brother or sister in my life so it never fell to me to look after a younger relative, or even baby-sit a neighbour's child for that matter. It didn't enter my mind that children would be such an important part of my life, nor was I even concerned that I had to find a husband, let alone have children.

With a life as wife and mother the furthest thing from my mind, I was in my senior year at high school when I decided that I would pursue a career in dentistry – perhaps as a dental assistant. I was so firm on this decision that I transferred to another high school, which offered a dental assistant program, even though it put me back a year from graduation. What I discovered during the two-year dental program was that I enjoyed and had a knack for the lab work associated with dentistry. I found employment soon after my graduation, working for a dentist who ran his own lab. I enjoyed my work, and my reputation as a crown and bridge specialist blossomed. My career was progressing nicely.

Meeting Peter and falling in love, came as a bit of a surprise, since I wasn't actively looking for a relationship. But surprise or not, Pete was the man for me and when we got married it was natural that we discussed each other's vision of family. Peter and I were in sync. We would have two children, and I opted to be a stay-at-home mom. We analyzed our finances and planned for a household, which could be run on one income. My first pregnancy put our plan into action.

But along with expecting our first child, I discovered that I loved being pregnant. I was blissfully unaware that every woman didn't feel as wonderful as I felt. Here was this miracle growing inside of me – ME! Every kick was a reminder of the precious life that was absolutely dependent on my nurturing love for its survival. I was awestruck, humbled, and joyous

Enter Liz. We joined a prenatal class where Liz was the instructor. I liked her calm manner and was impressed with how knowledgeable she was about the whole process – not just the prenatal, but also the delivery and neonatal stages. When she asked the class if any of us wanted her present during delivery we did not hesitate to accept the offer. For our first birth, I wanted all the advantages available to me and Peter so that neither of us would have to worry about what should or should not be happening. Our son, Andrew – all 8 pounds, 8 ounces of him – was born with an easy labour. Liz, acting as birthing coach, made me feel so strong with her caring support, that I knew then that she would be by my side for our second child. I loved being a mother to my first baby, and readily looked forward to my next pregnancy. Within two years, Nicholas came into our lives, again with the help of Liz.

There was nothing in my life, which could have predicted what happened next. Although we agreed that our family would consist of two children, I felt a strong desire to experience the pregnancy journey one more time. It wasn't easy and it called for a lot of sacrifice. It required great planning, both financially and logistically – did we even have room in our small two-storey home? Again, with Pete and I doing everything we could to accommodate this decision, we went forward into our third pregnancy. But this expectancy came with some unexpected news: I was carrying twins! When we submitted the birth announcement for Jaclyn and Michelle, it read, “Peter and Carol announce we've evened it up, Andrew and Nicholas each have a baby sister to help with.” And, as always, “Thanks to Coach Liz” among the labour and delivery staff who assisted.

Somewhere along the way, my life had taken on a new meaning and had become the lives of my children. I volunteered at their schools, attended field trips, and offered my assistance to their speech pathology program. And just to emphasize how committed I

was to volunteering, I once became known as the *lice* lady when I helped in the regular inspection of children's heads for that nasty pest. (Please, no nit-picking jokes!)

But that's not the only way my life took on new meaning. Thanks to Liz, and her support in all of my pregnancies and deliveries, I became filled with a sense of mission. My pregnancies were wonderful, but as I became aware that not all mothers experience such good outcomes, I wanted to do what I could to support them and bring them the same sense of empowerment that gave my life so much joy and meaning. Within four years of giving birth to our twin girls, Pete and I, along with our four children, accommodated a new role for me in our lives – Doula.

A doula is a person who assists a woman while pregnant, during delivery, and post partum. A doula serves to support not only the pregnant mother, but also her surrounding family, which includes the baby's father as well as the baby's grandparents. I entered into this career by becoming involved with the local association of doulas, thanks to Liz's guidance in pointing me to the right networks. I provided education to other doulas, and acted as event coordinator for our Southern Ontario division. A doula to a pregnant mom was a paying job – hopefully – but many times my services were freely given where the mother, who may have been a single mom, experienced financial constraints for one reason or another.

For nine years I performed this role, taking on a few pregnant mothers a year, but keeping it at less than one per month. My own family played an important part just by understanding that being on call 24/7 meant that I could be absent without warning, and for periods of time lasting up to 40 hours – yes, that did happen once.

The expression of gratitude I received from not only the new mother, but also husbands and parents of the new mother, reassured me that my choice was purposeful and fulfilling. I kept records of every new family I encountered, and now estimate that I have been present for at least 50 births. It warms my heart to hear from any of these families, like the one who sends me their annual Christmas newsletter.

So, my dear Liz, I am grateful for your part in guiding me into your world of pregnancy support. When we met, I admired your calming influence, sense of control, and of course your knowledge. They are qualities which I learned to bring into my role

of doula. Although those days are behind me, our kinship has really only begun. Thank you for inspiring me to celebrate and share the joys and rewards of motherhood.

* * *

I have chosen a recipe that has fit in well with my family lifestyle. It's "Yellow Split Pea Soup" and is one of my favourites. When you're feeding a family of six (and not counting the revolving door of student billets we have taken in over the years), you learn to make the most of precious resources. If you take the time to work with whole foods – as compared with pre-packaged meals and snacks – it is actually more economical. And it keeps us healthier, too.

* * * * *

YELLOW SPLIT PEA SOUP

2 cups washed yellow split peas

1 large onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, chopped

3" piece wakame

1 bay leaf

3 stalks celery (with leaves) chopped

3 carrots, sliced

1 cup diced potatoes

1/2 cup finely chopped parsley

10 cups water

2 tsp. sea salt

1/2 tsp. Louisiana Gold hot sauce (Franks) (I sprinkle crushed red pepper flakes in too)

1 tbsp. tamari

1/2 turnip, diced

Sauté onion and garlic in 1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil until tender. Add washed split peas, bay leaf, wakame and water. Cook until tender (about 1 hour). Remove bay leaf. Puree the pea/water mixture and return to pot. Add vegetables and seasonings and cook until tender. I puree the veggies when cooked. (Add more water if it boils down too much) Garnish with fresh parsley.

[back to top](#)

Laurel: The Joys of Friendships

When I look at the black and white photograph and see her standing with the other five, smiling timidly back at me, I'm reminded how much I loved my "Don Mills" friends. In this picture, she is cheerfully unaware that in a few short years, she will part company, eventually to never again see her very first school chums. I wonder if the other five who stood with her for this picture remember their friend, Laurel.



(Photo credit: Laurel)

It was the nature of my Dad's work at Bell Canada that relocated our family several times while I grew up. From Windsor, Ontario to London, Ontario, then to Montreal, Quebec, back to Don Mills, Ontario, and once more to Montreal, before settling in Hamilton, Ontario, the last of our moves.

Family moves can be hard on a child. Yet I never really felt upset when it happened. I can remember feeling sad to leave a new "best friend" but never was I afraid to face the next location, or worry that I'd be lonely. In fact, I made friends quickly and easily wherever our family was located. So, I really didn't mind that we moved so many times – it was simply part of our lifestyle.

And I feel fortunate to have some very interesting friends and family members in my life. I am often fascinated by their stories. What gives me the greatest of enjoyment is listening to a friend unfold their *drama in real life*. A long-lost relative. A trip to an exotic land. Meeting a celebrity. A career success story.

Yet, Don Mills was special. Those girls in the photograph were great friends then, and I bet they'd be great friends today. I can just imagine...

Marla stands on the far left. She was quite artistic, and it didn't hurt that her father worked at a paper factory. Whenever we played at her house, we had hours of fun making things out of – what else? – paper. I wonder what the future brought to my creative pal, my best friend from kindergarten to Grade 4. Well, Marla, you may be interested to know that after we left Don Mills, I spent Grade 5 and 6 in Montreal.

In Montreal, I met my “next” best friend, Debbie. Oddly enough, I didn't experience the same sense of a group that I had with Don Mills, but Debbie more than made up for it because she was a true and honest friend. It was hard to say good-bye to her when our family moved to Hamilton after Grade 6. And I'm sad to say, she passed away a number of years later.

To Marla's left, stands Elaine. Elaine, even in this photograph you come across as very bookish. It makes me laugh that you could be such a bookworm when I think back to some of the ways you made our lives so much fun. How great was it that you lived across the street from a bubble gum factory. Although it's gross now to think how we would venture over there to find discarded gumballs. And, of course we loved that you had an older brother in a band, which kept us up-to-date with all the cool music. I think he was 13 then.

Elaine, I might guess that you accomplished great things throughout your life. My career experience was actually very straight forward. It seems old-fashioned now, but I began to work at Bell, the same company where my Dad spent his entire working life. I worked up through the ranks there until the day I qualified for a full company pension. Company pensions are becoming unheard of these days, and most people will work for at least two, three or even more companies during their working lives. Would you have ever guessed that the company that caused our separation, would be the one where I'd end up staying put?

And there's me standing next to Elaine. I know I'm not tall, but even among these Grade 3 girls, I'm still the shortest one of the bunch.

Beside me is Joan. Joan, you remind me of our great neighbourhood. We lived on a small street with attached housing and *everyone* came outside to play together. Even our parents would be outdoors with us. There was no end to our play, whether it was bike riding, hide & seek, tag, or skipping. What an active playmate you were, a real tomboy,

in fact. I'm sure you would have grown up to be great with kids. I think you'd be happy to know that I have a son. We named him *Norman* after my husband, Norman.

In Norm's family, it was a tradition to name their first son after their father. Norm's father was also *Norman*. That made my son, *Norman III*. We were pretty lucky to have him, especially since we were starting to believe that having children was not in the cards for us. Norm was born three months premature and given that he had such a low hemoglobin count, the doctors were not overly optimistic, even about his survival. They also warned us about the perils of blindness, when babies are hooked up to oxygen for too long. But he was our little miracle. He wore glasses for most of his childhood to correct his weak eye muscles caused by Strabismus (which is common among premature babies), but generally, he was quite healthy.

In fact, our red-headed son beat all the odds and now he drives dump trucks, plows and transport trucks for a living. He may have been a little delicate at birth, but you wouldn't know it today!

Who is that girl standing next to you, Joan? I'm laughing now because I cannot remember her name. I'd say she snuck into our shot, but I don't think photo bombing had been invented yet. I'll get back to her in a moment.

Cathy stands at the far right, providing the perfect book-end to Marla on the left. Cathy, I remember you as one of the friendliest girls I would ever know. You were so inclusive, and made everyone around you feel welcome. Aha! That's it. The photograph. The pose. It was a birthday party where you, no doubt, invited and brought along this other girl. I think you had a knack for bringing people together, and it made you happy when it happened. In fact, I think you would enjoy hearing how I met my husband Norm.

After our move from Montreal to Hamilton, I started Grade 7 in a fairly large elementary school. Once again, I found myself starting all over to make new friends. Lucky for me, I wasn't the only "new" girl because this larger school took in students graduating from Grade 6 in other smaller neighbouring schools. I joined the choir – the place where all the cool kids were, and even ran for secretary treasurer of the student council, which I can't believe now that I even dared it. (And no, I didn't get elected.)

This school had a large auditorium with the entire second floor hallway overlooking it, like some giant balcony. For some gym classes, the back of the auditorium was converted into a volleyball court. I hated volleyball, but I have one very important and vivid memory of it.

I remember the day I looked up at the second storey hallway to see a class of students walking along as they rotated to their next subject. I caught the eye of this guy, who just happened to look right back at me. I remember thinking, “Oooh, he’s cute.”

I didn’t realize then that I was looking at my future husband. Norm was the only one for me – and I mean that quite literally. We started “dating” (I put *dating* in quotes because I wasn’t really “allowed” to date yet – gotta love those quotes marks!). By Grade 8 graduation, we made it official – boyfriend and girlfriend. By the time we got married, we had already been going out for seven years – longer if you count the “pre-dating.”

So, Marla, Elaine, Joan, Other Girl, and Cathy, I’m very happy with my life and I hope you are too. I met and made a lot of friends along the way. Thanks for setting the stage to the value and joy that a group of friends can give.

* * *

The recipe I have chosen is called “Banana Split.” I love to bake and would do more of it if only I had more sweet-toothed friends and family members. Even as a little girl, I learned my way around baking ovens, especially at Christmas time when my mother and I would make our annual Holiday fruit cake. Today, I am happy to oblige whenever I am asked to contribute a dessert to any family gathering.

There are several dessert recipes that I’m especially fond of. But I have chosen the *Banana Split* because it’s fun and easy to make. And it’s a recipe that I have had the most requests for copies of.

* * * * *

BANANA SPLIT

Crust:

3 cups Graham Wafer crumbs

1/2 lb butter (melted)

Mix together and press into 9 X 13 pan.

Bake at 350 F for 8 minutes – cool completely.

First Layer:

1/2 lb butter

2 eggs

2 cups icing sugar

Beat together for 15 minutes.

Spread on crust and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

Second Layer:

1 Large Can crushed pineapple – drain, but keep juice for dipping the bananas in.

2 Large bananas – slice thinly and dip in pineapple juice to keep from going brown.

Then place on first layer.

Then spread drained crushed pineapple over top.

1 Package frozen sliced strawberries thickened with cornstarch and cooled. (I used strawberry preserves that had lots of big berries in them – then I didn't have to thicken anything.) Spread over top.

Third Layer:

1 Container of Cool Whip

Top with chocolate sauce – nuts are optional.

[back to top](#)

Barb: A Road Free to Wander

“Barb, you would be late for your own funeral,” Wally often says to me. To which I say, “I certainly hope so!”

As alarming as this little interchange may sound, my husband and I are actually enjoying a good laugh when we say it because it reminds us of a humorous story about the beginning of our married life together and the beginning of my reputation for being late.

It may have seemed to Wally that his bride was late for her own wedding as he stood at the church altar. But actually it was just that the priest and I had mixed up our signals. He was expecting me to step out to start the ceremony, while I was waiting for his cue! It was this waiting of one for the other, which caused a delay. As it turned out, I was “late” even though I was on time.

We got married at a very young age. We were teenagers, just graduating from high school and there was very little planning compared to today’s couples. I know this because my son and his bride had a long engagement and they took the time to establish themselves in their careers before finally tying the knot just recently. But for Wally and me, it was different because we each knew we had met the right one and we were ready. We had set out on our journey together and let the road ahead show us what there was to discover, a lifestyle which has served us well. Is it any wonder then, that our favourite vacations are road trips? The perfect complement to our marriage, a road trip lets us head out on a journey with little waiting or planning. And since we’re not afraid of getting lost once in a while, we have enjoyed even bigger rewards.

On our travels, we have a destination in mind, but never an itinerary. Wally is an excellent navigator and I love driving: a vacationing dream team. Our journeys evolve as we let the surroundings determine our route, which lets us enjoy being in the moment wherever we are. Keeping to a schedule the way bus tours do would drive us both crazy. Our holiday destinations have included nine out of ten Canadian provinces (still haven’t been to Newfoundland or the northern territories) and close to forty American states. We choose a place, a route to get there, and go.

It may seem risky to travel without accommodations booked ahead, but for us the opposite is true. Some of our past road trips were camping holidays. At first, Wally and

I packed a tent for ourselves, and then later, when we had our two sons, we pulled a tent trailer. Camping road trips are good for families because you're taking your accommodations with you. We have always had good results when we discover a place to stay upon arrival. The only time we had a miserable experience with accommodations was at a place that we had booked in advance through a travel website. We had been advised that the nearby attraction we wanted to see was so popular that we shouldn't leave it to chance, so we already had our tickets purchased in advance, too.

The pre-booked hotel was nothing like they had advertised. The pool was empty, the rooms were sparse, and the décor was in need of a makeover. And the attraction we visited? The attendant at the gate told us that we could have bought our tickets the same day because they always keep some reserved for long distance travelers like us.

We prefer our gypsy-style traveling. Like the time we went to Michigan. Destination: Frankenmuth. Frankenmuth is a wonderful city for vacationers, with many charming attractions, from their top-rated riverboat tours to their famous Christmas specialty shops. But it was just like us that we ended up further north in Traverse City to see their Cherry Festival. At the gift shop, I was fascinated by these Petoskey rocks for sale. Now I'm a bit of a rock collector and found these interesting because of their intricate designs which are formed by fossils. When I learned that this rock is Michigan's state rock, named after the town of Petoskey, I knew then I wanted to find my own rock – in Petoskey, an hour's drive from where we were. Wally and I were both game for this new side trip, in spite of his doubt that I would find such a rarity – that and his comment, “if you want to find rocks, try looking in your head.”

Petoskey proved to be a gem all on its own. A quaintly beautiful town with centuries-old shops and specialty stores, it was a perfect stop for an overnight stay. We spent some time enjoying their park by the water's edge. It was as beautiful as a painting. We saw kids playing in the water with distant sailboats as their backdrop. The beachfront provided us with plenty of vantage points to appreciate the sights around us. Wally enjoyed his walk along the paths of this scenic park area by the water while I searched in earnest for my Petoskey rock. I was determined I'd find one and my determination paid off. I spotted a perfect specimen to add to my collection. Another rewarding detour.

The age of the Internet and the availability of Wi-Fi has made our style of road trip easier. We no longer need to stop at local tourist information centres to pick up maps and brochures. Instead we can accomplish anything from getting directions to booking accommodations for a spontaneous overnight stay all at the touch of our notebook keyboard. It's research on the go.

For us the destination has always been the journey. We may have had our fair share of missed exits or wrong turns, but they have led us to hidden treasures that we would not have otherwise discovered. We love that our roads are free to wander and like J.R.R. Tolkien said, "Not all those who wander are lost."

* * *

The recipe I have chosen is called "Ceviche de Camaron: Shrimp Ceviche 'Cocktail'". I love experimenting with new dishes as much as I love traveling to new places. This shrimp cocktail comes from one of my favourite recipe websites, epicurious.com

Notations in square brackets with italic font are [*my comments*].

* * * * *

CEVICHE DE CAMARON: SHRIMP CEVICHE "COCKTAIL"

yield: Makes 3 cups, serving 6 as an appetizer

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
- 1 generous pound unpeeled smallish shrimp [*I prefer the ones that are 41/50 count to a pound (Shrimp are uncooked) – I used larger zipperback, de-veined shrimp*]
- 1/2 medium white onion, chopped into 1/4 inch pieces
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh cilantro, plus several sprigs for garnish
- 1/2 cup ketchup
- 1 to 2 tablespoons vinegary Mexican bottled hot sauce (such as Tamazula, Valentina or Búfalo, the latter being on the sweet side) [*Franks or Sriracha works*]
- About 2 tablespoons olive oil, preferably extra-virgin (optional, but recommended to smooth out sharpness) [*I used it*]
- 1 cup diced peeled cucumber or jícama (or 1/2 cup of each) [*I used English cucumbers unpeeled*]

- 1 small ripe avocado, peeled, pitted and cubed
 - Salt
 - Several lime slices for garnish
 - Tostadas or tortilla chips, store-bought or homemade or saltine crackers for serving
- [Scoops work well]*

Preparation

1. Cooking and Marinating the Shrimp.

[When using zipperback, just return to boil, drain immediately (don't cover and steam), and cool on cookie tray sheet]

Bring 1 quart salted water to a boil and add 2 tablespoons of the lime juice. Scoop in the shrimp, cover and let the water return to the boil. Immediately remove from the heat, set the lid askew and pour off all the liquid. Replace the cover and let the shrimp steam off the heat for 10 minutes. Spread out the shrimp in a large glass or stainless steel bowl to cool completely. Peel and devein the shrimp if you wish: One by one lay the shrimp on your work surface, make a shallow incision down the back and scrape out the (usually) dark intestinal tract. Toss the shrimp with the remaining 1/2 lime juice, cover and refrigerate for about an hour. *[Before adding to the other ingredients cut shrimp into bite-sized pieces]*

2. The flavorings.

In a small strainer, rinse the onion under cold water, then shake off the excess liquid. Add to the shrimp bowl along with the cilantro, ketchup, hot sauce, optional olive oil, cucumber and/or jicama and avocado. Taste and season with salt, usually about 1/2 teaspoon. Cover and refrigerate if not serving immediately.

3. Serving the ceviche.

Spoon the ceviche into sundae glasses, martini glasses, or small bowls: garnish with sprigs of cilantro and slices of lime. Serve with tostadas, tortilla chips or saltines to enjoy alongside.

Working Ahead:

The ceviche is best made the day it is served. The flavorings can be added to the shrimp a few hours in advance.

[back to top](#)

Gloria: My Reminder of What's Important

I keep a letter, folded and tucked inside my wallet. It reads like a simple thank-you note: "Dear Gloria, We would like to thank you once more for your participation in the clinical study..." and goes on to explain the subject of the study, and reminds me why I had been selected to participate. But this letter is no ordinary thank-you note. I have recently started to think of it as a document as important as my birth certificate, for in some ways, it's like a birth certificate, or re-birth certificate. It reminds me of how I survived a near-fatal event.

As far back as I can remember, I faced and dealt with challenges as I went along, and each time, grew a little stronger because of it. I knew what I wanted and took whatever steps necessary to achieve it. For example, I grew up in an ethnic Italian household and was not allowed to date until I turned eighteen. But I was much younger when I met my boyfriend in high school and we became inseparable. Of course, my parents did not know about him until I was older and long after we had spent years dating and by the time I reached the tender and naïve age of 22, I began my life as a married woman.

Although my marriage to my high school sweetheart ended in divorce about 5 years later, I wouldn't trade that heartache for what I learned along the way. The best adventure during our brief marriage was our two years of living in California. While my husband worked as a nurse, I enrolled in a state University, something I always wanted to do. I enjoyed the academic atmosphere and I enjoyed learning about a world from which I was once sheltered. When we returned home, it was not long before I picked up where I left off in California and I got a University job here, too. Life was good, but then, soon after, our marriage ended.

Divorce was unimaginable. To my parents, it was a family scandal, which in itself caused great distress. But my grief went further: I was still a young woman in my twenties, now dealing with a failed marriage and an uncertain future. It took me nearly a year to recover, but when I did, I emerged with a new sense of strength and independence, much of which my University experience helped me achieve. I felt, 'if I can survive this, I can survive anything.'

Within a few short years, I met someone new and was happy to fall in love again. We got married and wanted to start a family. It was this decision that set up the next test

of my strength because we soon discovered that to have children, we would require in vitro fertilization treatments. Our determination led to success, which came in the form of beautiful twins, Alexander and Julia. We may have been older parents, but we embraced our new lifestyle and felt that our life was perfect.

*

I first knew something was wrong because of the intense pain I had in my abdominal region along with other symptoms, which seemed odd and random, such as severe hives on my arms, hands, legs and feet. My doctor surmised that the pain was probably ‘normal’ within my cycle, and prescribed antihistamines for the hives.

I went on like this for the better part of a year and it only got worse. I have a high tolerance for pain, but when it became unbearable, my husband took me to Emergency. I was left to wait for hours and something happened while I was waiting. What I did not know then was that an infectious abscess had been growing inside me and was about to burst. And the moment it did, I knew it because I suddenly felt the pressure subside and I became weak and lethargic.

A blood test showed that poison was coursing through my system. An ultrasound confirmed the presence of an abscess, and that it had indeed ruptured. There was no time for delay. I immediately had surgery to clean out the remnants of the infection. The diagnosis confirmed their worst fears – human tumour necrosis factor, or TNF, a type of flesh-eating disease, but *inside* of me rather than on my skin.

The next eight days of my life are lost to me forever. I was kept heavily sedated and hooked up to many medical monitors and was on a constant antibiotic drip. My family was advised to expect the worst because this is a condition that people don’t tend to survive. That’s what makes what happened next so remarkable. My husband was approached by a doctor from the department of Infectious Diseases about a research study that was testing a new drug designed as an antibody to TNF. As a double-blind experiment, no one could know if I would receive the experimental drug or a placebo. The window of time to begin the treatment was quickly closing. Facing what seemed to be no choice, he consented.

The letter I keep in my wallet was mailed to me one year after my hospital ordeal. It confirmed what had become obvious: I survived the unsurvivable because I was given

the experimental drug with the active medication. I will never forget the smiles beaming from my husband and my mother as they watched me emerge from my eight days of darkness. And I will always remember the sweet taste of the apple juice that I sipped after the removal of my tracheal tube – it seemed like the most wonderful treat in the world even though I’ve never been fond of apple juice before. There would be many months of recovery ahead of me, but I was alive.

Today I look around me and appreciate what I see. I have spent many rewarding years working at McMaster University, and more recently at Brock University as the associate director of their co-op programs. My children are grown and live at home with me while they pursue post-secondary education, an endeavour which I whole-heartedly encourage and admire. I have learned from experience that life’s events hold the power to make us stronger.

I think I have become pretty good at seeing what’s important in life!

* * *

I’m calling the recipe I’ve chosen, “Gloria’s Basic Pasta Sauce.” With various changes and tweaking over the years, it comes into existence out of the basic training I had as a daughter of an ethnic Italian family. While growing up, it seemed to me that teenagers from other families enjoyed liberties like hanging out with friends after school. Instead, I’d be at home with the daily and weekly chores that were expected of me. I was spending time at my mother’s side learning to become a good wife and mother and much of that included learning how to cook. Today, creating this sauce is so second nature to me that I had to make it and write down the instructions as I went along. Before now, this was not a recorded recipe.

This sauce is a combination of the two main pasta sauces normally found in Italian cuisine – a Bolognese sauce and a basic tomato sauce. Generally speaking, in northern parts of Italy, pasta sauce is quite thick and meaty. This type of sauce consists of various ground meats such as beef, pork and veal and little tomato sauce or paste. In the central and southern Italian regions, the sauce is primarily tomato based with no ground meat. However, often chicken pieces, sausage and ribs are browned and cooked with the tomatoes for flavor but will be removed before the sauce is served. The meat can then be eaten separately.

In my version, I've modified these two sauces to create a sauce that incorporates both of these regional favourites. My husband grew up accustomed to a tomato sauce and I a meat sauce. This version tends to satisfy both our palettes and our kids love it too.

* * * * *

GLORIA'S BASIC PASTA SAUCE

Ingredients:

1 small to medium onion, finely chopped

2 – 3 cloves of garlic, finely minced

2 – 3 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil (or enough to liberally coat the bottom of a large pot)

1 tbsp. of butter

1 large carrot, grated

1/2 pound of ground beef, pork and veal (equal amounts of each to equal 1/2 pound in total – veal can be omitted if preferred. For a meatier/heartier sauce, increase the amount of meat as desired, but no more than 1 lb. is recommended).

1/4 tsp. of dried basil leaves (or 1 twig of fresh basil if you have it)

1/2 cup of good dry red wine (this can be omitted if preferred)

1 cup of chicken stock/broth (low sodium if available)

1 tsp. of salt

1/2 tsp. of pepper

2 large cans of good quality crushed or pureed tomatoes (3 cans if you've increased the amount of meat)

1 small can of tomato paste

Preparation Time: approx. 15 - 20 minutes

Cooking time: approx. 3 hours

Method:

* Peel carrot and grate with a cheese grater (set aside)

* Peel and finely chop onion (set aside)

* Peel and mince garlic (set aside)

- * Heat a large pot or dutch oven on med-high for approximately 1 minute or until a drop of water sizzles when dropped in
 - * Add olive oil and butter, bring up to a sizzling point again (about 30 seconds) do not let butter burn
 - * Add onion and garlic and cook until translucent and onion is just beginning to caramelize (3 – 5 minutes)
 - * Add shredded carrot and cook for approx. 2 – 3 minutes (adjust heat if onions appear to be browning too quickly)
 - * Add meat entirely and break up pieces with a wooden spoon until the size of small peas/pebbles – brown meat for about 4 – 5 minutes stirring often so as not to burn and stick
 - * When all meat is nicely browned, pour in the wine to deglaze the pot making sure to scrape up all the little brown bits; cook 2 – 3 minutes until most liquid has been reduced
 - * Pour crushed tomatoes through a sieve to remove any little seeds and add to pot – swish a small amount of water around the cans to get all the tomato out – add to pot
 - * Dissolve tin of tomato paste in 2 cups of water and pour into pot
 - * Add chicken stock
 - * Add salt, pepper and basil
 - * Bring mixture to a low boil and then reduce heat to medium-low so that it remains at a constant low simmer
 - * Cook partially covered for about 3 hours stirring frequently to avoid sticking – reduce heat if necessary
 - * If sauce appears to be too thick, add water and/or chicken stock to desired consistency along the way (be aware that additional chicken stock will add salt so don't overdo – water works just fine)
 - * As flavours mingle and settle, taste periodically throughout cooking and adjust salt if necessary
- (Trick: if too salty, peel a small potato and throw into pot of sauce – potato will absorb some of the excess salt while cooking.)
- Yield: 6 – 8 cups

This sauce freezes perfectly. Once sauce is cooled, transfer into plastic containers of 1 or 2 cup sizes, or more or less depending on preference. Freeze for up to 3 months.

Serve:

This is a robust sauce with a consistency that lends itself well to all shapes and sizes of pasta. Prepare desired pasta according to package directions – make sure to add salt to the cooking water as this is the essence of making delicious pasta.

Drain pasta and toss with a liberal amount of sauce and top dish with a generous dusting of parmigiano reggiano grated cheese.

It also makes a perfect base for dishes like lasagna, cannelloni, or eggplant parmigiana.

Enjoy!

[back to top](#)

Karen: A Career Path Pattern

“So Karen, how are you enjoying your retirement hiatus?” My friend of over 50 years sits across from me at a table in Tim Horton’s, asking the question which I get asked a lot. I begin with golf. It’s something that my husband enjoys, which seemed like a good reason to take a look at it myself. After all, I didn’t want to become a “golf widow” – not to downplay the reason for signing up for golf. In fact, I like the challenge it poses – both mental and physical. I also like meeting and getting to know other women at the club. So, it wasn’t long before I got involved in the ladies executive committee, which focuses on events and tournaments for women. My background in marketing was put to use by this committee when they asked if I’d be in charge of publicity. I rather liked that challenge, too.

No, I tell my friend, the work I did on publicity is not what I’d call a leadership role. But it was interesting that she asked because the committee did approach me to take on the role of vice-captain, with a view to captain over a two year period. My friend is not surprised, and tells me so. She suggests that leadership roles are simply a natural fit for me. I hadn’t really put that much thought into it, but she insists that she could see it all along. Well, she has known me for a long time.

Very funny, I say, but noticed she wasn’t laughing when she asked if I had been offered a position on the club’s Board of Directors.

I insist that the only position I was asked to fill was the vice captain of the ladies executive committee. And I turned it down. I’m surprised she asks, ‘why?’

Well for one thing, I’m already serving as chairman for a charitable organization I became involved with recently. I ask my coffee companion why this makes her laugh, but she shakes her head and tells me to go on.

Well there were other considerations. I made a goal for myself after I completed my last professional contract with a neighbouring city that I would get in shape by focusing on healthy eating and participating in many of the athletic endeavours I had so little time for before.

It’s a great goal, one which makes perfect sense for me because it brings me back to my roots, so to speak. Sports and athletics were a big part of my life throughout high school. University and career relegated athletics to weekends only. And now, with

career paused indefinitely, I have happily brought my athletic pursuits back to the forefront. These days, a typical week in spring and summer includes cycling, yoga, golf, and gym workouts and in winter, it means skiing on weekends.

Do my leisure activities imitate my career? Perhaps my friend is right, that there is a law of nature at work here. But it turns out that as much as she thought she knew why I would be asked to join the Board of Directors, she really knew very little of my career years, other than that I started out working in city planning.

She knew that I had pursued a career in urban planning. As I think back, I realize now that my Geography teacher played an important role in my career choice. I signed up for his urban geography course because it sounded quite interesting. Thanks to his creative teaching style with the hands-on way he allowed us to experience urban planning and development, he exceeded my expectations and now I'd like to think that I exceeded his.

What would I tell him today, you ask? I guess I'd start with Waterloo University where I chose to pursue my degree in Environmental Studies. After I graduated from Waterloo, it took about a year to find a job in my field of urban planning. I was hired by a municipality near Toronto to work on city planning projects, a pretty good position for a recent grad. I knew I was quite lucky since the job market in this field was pretty tight.

And as lucky as that was, something even more fortunate was taking place. The city mayor was very pro business and within the administration a new division, business development, was forming. The fellow that was heading it offered me the position of assistant business development officer, which I gladly accepted. I soon found the work interesting and motivating.

Within a few years he left the position, which suddenly made me the most senior staff – at the age of 30. While they did a national search for a new department head, I was placed as acting director. As they kept searching and interviewing for the position, I finally questioned them, 'Why not me?' They gave me two reasons: 'You're too young and you have no management experience.'

Although I couldn't do anything about their first objection, I countered that I have already been handling the job, and I've certainly become known in the industry. I

suggested that I be judged on my own merit. Eventually, they agreed and the position was mine.

For the next dozen years or so, I presided over the city's business development team and watched with pride at the growth of a city gaining world-wide attention as an attractive jurisdiction to run a business. I traveled with the mayor to Europe, Asia and throughout North America, giving presentations to business leaders, promoting the city as an ideal place to locate their offices and operations.

No, I tell my friend, I don't have a fear of public speaking. Butterflies, maybe, but not fear. She asks about my family. I see she's wondering where I fit the time for our skiing in Ellicottville, where she knows we own a chalet.

My husband I are avid skiers, and I didn't mind that it meant giving up tennis to fit more time for skiing. When our sons were born, we wanted them to enjoy the sport as much as we did. As each turned four, we would strap on his own little pair of skis and teach him how to manage the snowy slopes. Eventually, our skiing family was complete. Skiing in Ellicottville started with an invitation from friends to join them on a ski weekend. We loved it so much, that we decided we would have a place of our own there.

Wow, tennis. I haven't thought about those days in ages. I'm remembering now how much I loved the game of tennis. My first summer job was working at the canteen of a local tennis club. And now that I think of it, I eventually became the manager.

My friend laughs again, and I'm catching on to what she finds so funny. No, my jobs did not always end up with me in charge. For example, one of my favourite jobs was the summer I spent as tour guide for Hamilton's Dundurn Castle. We dressed in period costume and led tourists through one of Hamilton's great landmarks. Yes, my friend, I guess it was where I got my start at promoting a city!

Now she has that calculating look on her face. Her memory is better than mine, so I don't tend to challenge her on details from the past.

Yes, of course I remember being on the high school cheerleading squad. And no, I didn't forget that I became head cheerleader. She smiles.

It seems I have to remind her that the golf club's Board of Directors is not in the cards right now. Not that timing and opportunity haven't played an important role during my career.

One of the more adventurous placements happened when I left the city business development office to join a newly formed multi-city international marketing organization. Soon after I joined, the presiding President and CEO stepped down and I happened to be the right person at the right place and at the right time. I worked with a great team of people and we attracted a number of successful business investments during my time there.

My phone rings and I apologize because I thought I had turned it off. But my friend insists I take the call because she wants to take a washroom break anyway.

“Hello? Yes. Oh, I see. Please, tell me more. For how long? Starting when? Sounds like a great opportunity, yes, I will accept.”

My friend returns to our table just as I’m hanging up. She is looking at me like she knows what just happened.

You won’t believe this, or maybe you will! That call was from the President of the Board of Directors of the golf club. It turns out that one of the Board members will be resigning early and... my friend interrupts me to finish my sentence.

Yes, I answer her, you were right.

* * *

The recipe I chose is called “Appetizer of the Hour.” Our culinary talented friend, Barb first brought this appetizer to a potluck dinner. Why re-invent the wheel?

This has become one of my “go to” recipes when I want to serve an appetizer that looks great, tastes great, but is easy to make. Once people try it, they all want the recipe.

* * * * *

APPETIZER OF THE HOUR

1 package (8 oz / 250 g) cream cheese, softened
1/2 tsp curry powder
1/4 cup jalapeno jelly
1/4 cup mango chutney
1/4 cup toasted pecans (or walnuts)
1/4 cup dried cranberries
1/4 cup finely chopped green onions (optional)

In a medium bowl, beat cream cheese until soft. Add curry powder and mix well. Spread into a shallow glass serving dish. Top with jalapeno jelly and chutney. Sprinkle with nuts, cranberries and green onions. Serve with crackers.

[back to top](#)

Cathy M: For the Love of Laughter

Aunt Beulah was my dad's sister. She was one of eight children who grew up in Nova Scotia. Some of her siblings, including my dad, moved to Ontario, but my adorable Aunt Beulah along with her sister, Marguerite lived her whole life in this beautiful maritime province. She passed away at Christmastime and we decided that in Nova Scotia, the summer would be a far more practical time of year to bring the family together to honour her at a memorial service.

I had emailed my cousin Penny to get the details. Her mom was Aunt Beulah's sister too and like my dad, Penny's mom also moved to Ontario. It had been a long time since Penny and I had talked or even written to each other. Not surprising, I suppose, considering she now lives in Belgium. But the warmth of her email reply melted the time and distance with her friendly tone and newsy information. "Hey Cathy," she began, as though our emails flew back and forth all the time. Penny planned to be at the memorial with her husband and kids and wrote, "Maybe we can get together this summer while we're over."

"Hi Penny," I begin my email reply as I search my thoughts for what to say. I want to tell her how I like the idea of a memorial to celebrate Aunt Beulah's life because it gives us an opportunity to reflect on what an inspiration Aunt Beulah's gift for storytelling and laughter has been for me, and probably for all of us. To this day, I enjoy telling stories to my friends and hearing their laughter in return, just like my maritime aunts did. All my life, I felt the strong bond she shared with her sisters and I'm sure that Penny felt it, too.

"Do you know what your itinerary will be once you're in Canada?" I write this as I imagine what Penny and I might talk about if we did get a chance to get together and 'share all our news in person' as she put it. I ponder how quickly time goes by, with so much that happens that we can barely keep track of what is 'news.' Perhaps I could tell her about the goals and activities that have become an important part of my 'new' retirement lifestyle.

My husband, Ken and I are both enjoying retirement and are lucky that we each got early retirement packages from our workplaces. And because we met and married at a later age than most of our friends we have a teenaged son at a stage in life when most

couples are contemplating their first grandchild. I wonder if Connor considers retired parents an advantage or disadvantage over younger working parents. But I think we're just as busy as working parents, if not more so, with Ken's part-time job at the golf club, his motorcycle treks, and his swimming schedule and me with Tai Chi, duplicate bridge and my organized walks. "We may have to retire from retirement, LOL." I type this as I think of how quickly time goes by and I find myself thinking about Aunt Beulah and her sisters again.

I have very fond memories of listening to their stories. It was like listening to music. And although I could never do it justice by repeating one of their fabulous yarns, to this day, one punch line in particular has served us well over the years: *I never did like that lamp!* I chuckle with both respect and envy of their story-telling talent. Is this a common trait of all Maritimers? When the family gets together at the memorial, I'm sure we'll spend most of the time reminiscing about our favourite east coast aunts.

"Let's see if we can work something out for a get-together," I write eagerly once I see how Aunt Beulah is bringing us together one more time. It's hard to imagine another opportunity like this. It will be fun to do some reminiscing of our own lives, too. I wonder how well Penny remembers Hamilton, where we grew up. Penny met her Belgian husband through her association with competitive horseback riding, and Belgium is where they have lived ever since.

I smile as I bask in fond memories and reflect on the good things around me. I count my blessings and consider the many sources of inspiration in my life – my wonderful husband and beautiful son, my involvement in various community outreach programs, my new role teaching Tai Chi and now, Aunt Beulah, who showed me the gift of laughter and story-telling.

Energized with these good thoughts, I flip the pages of our vacation photo album until I find it: With a lush garden as their backdrop, Aunt Beulah and her sister, Aunt Marguerite standing arm in arm, smiling back at me.



(Photo credit: Cathy M)

I am proud to be a part of a family tree that has produced the majesty and splendor that is Aunt Beulah and her sisters. In fact a tree is the perfect analogy because although firmly rooted in the ground below, trees rise to take on the shapes and contours of their environment. And the more that the environment influences their growth, the more interesting they become.

My aunts were rooted in their sense of humour and joy while growing up during the Great Depression. How well they rose above to reach for the heavens. As I think of it, I really hope that I will have some time to spend with Penny and enjoy our common ties to this wonderful family tree.

"There's so much to talk about," I now include in my email. The more I reflect on it, the more I'm aware of how important personal bonds are. Aunt Beulah must have known this all along as she and her sisters bonded together through stories, laughter, joy, and love, ever vibrant as they lived a good life. Who better to share these sentiments than with my cousin? Perhaps we are the next generation of "aunts" to carry on the tradition of bonding through laughter and story-telling.

"Looking forward to seeing you. Love, Cathy."

And, *SEND!*

* * *

I have selected for my recipe, "Roasted Root Vegetable Salad," one of my favourites. It is of course delicious, but there's more to enjoy than just good taste. I also

like that it fits into our healthy lifestyle, which Ken and I have made a commitment to as we enjoy our *retirement* years.

* * * * *

ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLE SALAD

Serve this dish warm or at room temperature

1/4 cup (50 ml) coconut oil

6 small parsnips, peeled

6 medium carrots, peeled

1 small butternut squash, peeled

2 red onions, peeled

1/3 cup (75 ml) julienned fresh ginger

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Dressing:

Juice of 1 large orange

2 tsp (10 ml) finely chopped fresh ginger

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 400 F (200 C)
2. Pour oil into a roasting pan and place in oven for 5 minutes. Cut parsnips and carrots in half, cut squash into large chunks and each onion into 6 wedges. Add to the hot pan with julienned fresh ginger, season and roast 20 minutes. Turn the vegetables and roast for another 20 to 30 minutes or until cooked.
3. Remove the cooked vegetables to a serving platter. Add the juice and finely chopped fresh ginger to the hot pan. Stir and season to taste. Pour over the cooked vegetables.

Serves 8

[back to top](#)

Hazel: Discovering My Chosen Profession

“Just fill out an application and see what happens,” she said to me. So I did, and what happened was that it changed the direction of my life.

Looking back, that was the way changes happened in my life. They were unexpected, yet fully anticipated at the same time. They evolved, yet seemed to happen suddenly. They appeared random, yet fit together like a jigsaw puzzle.

“Hazel speaking.” I decided that that was how I’d answer the phone during the business day, and then revert back to “Hello” after hours. When I set up my business from home, there were many details to address. Some things were already in place, as if there was foreshadowing in the way I furnished my home. Like how I designated the small bedroom of my three-bedroom house as my “office” years before I made the career change from teaching to financial planning.

It was always as if I had a plan all along, but just didn’t know it at the time. Like so many in my generation, I entered the workforce full time within days of my high school graduation. I qualified to go on to University, but I thought better of it. I reasoned that it would be a waste of time and money if I didn’t have a career plan. And I didn’t.

Yet, I felt proud of the job I landed on my first try. I was the bookkeeper of a pizza restaurant. Not waitress. Not dishwasher. Bookkeeper. I was efficient and accurate, qualities that got me promoted to the head office accounting department. And it didn’t stop there. As the restaurant grew with dozens of new locations being opened every year, the accounting department grew as well. I was promoted to payroll supervisor, with a staff of four. I helped design the in-house computerized payroll system, wrote manuals, and trained other restaurant bookkeepers. Lucky me – I have a career!

So when Carole, who worked in my department, kept insisting that I should consider teaching as a career, I dismissed her suggestions as nonsensical. How could she not see that I was on an important career trajectory already? And besides, I had never aspired to be a teacher.

Carole quit her job at the head office to take the one-year teacher certification course. We kept in touch throughout, and she rarely missed an opportunity to suggest that I do the same. It was quite bold of her to actually bring home that application and offer it up to me like a dare – *just see what happens!*

When I filled out the application to the Education Faculty of the University of Toronto, it didn't really occur to me that I would follow through. It was my way of saying, "Now will you stop this nonsense about teaching?"

Why, then, did I end up enrolling in the course? I cannot claim to know now what was on my mind then, but it may have had something to do with the fact that my application was accepted, sight unseen. I did not have to make any additional effort to get in. No exams, no interviews, no essays. Did I see this as a sign that I should move forward?

I enjoyed my year at U of T. I noticed how much I liked being a student, and generally I performed well. So well, that I received the award for top student in the teacher certification course that year. Next hurdle was finding a teaching position. My handicap was a lack of a University degree. Now, I had a reason to go to University.

I landed a teaching position at a small private school on the brink of a growth spurt. They did not require a University degree, but they liked that I had my Special Education certification.

Although it wasn't apparent by then, a pattern of career hopping was taking place. And with this pattern was a tendency towards *baptism by fire*. With each change I made, I began my new environment overwhelmed and wishing I could go back to where I was, or at least find the escape hatch.

When the school year began, I found myself in front of a small group of adolescent boys with varying types and degrees of behavioural problems. Nothing in my life had prepared me for this. Were it not for the support of my fellow teachers, and one veteran in particular, my teaching career would have ended before I made it past my first year.

Meanwhile, I got busy getting that University degree by taking courses part time. I saw that degree as my ticket out of this private school and into a better teaching environment.

Instead, something else happened. When you take University courses part time, you have to pick from what is available on the part-time calendar. At a rate of about three courses per year, my choices were fairly disparate and general. By the time I was in the second and third "year" (multiply by 3 for actual time to get to this point), it became

necessary to zero in on a faculty. I didn't set out to earn my degree in this area, but it turned out that Economics was where I did my best. So, a BA in Economics it was!

During the nine years it took me to earn my BA in Economics, my teaching position at the private school flourished as did the success of the school itself. I was their business high school teacher and I was loving it. No longer was I intent on leaving this job for any other teaching position anywhere.

My experiences at this school – the colleagues I met, the courses I taught, and the students who graduated to become my friends – shaped me in ways I could never have imagined had I remained on the career path where I started.

I did eventually leave this job and the teaching profession as well. But for the first time in my apparent *career hopping*, my decision was by design, not fate. It was while I was teaching a course that I created and called Money Management, that I discovered what was my calling: Financial Planning.

Did I experience my usual *baptism by fire* in my new chosen profession? Yes. Did I want to go back to where I was? I thought about it.

But if life had taught me anything so far, it was to move forward. And forward I moved. I struggled through countless obstacles and hardship. The thing about being in your *chosen* profession is that no matter how difficult the things you face are, you are willing to keep trying until you get it right. I was no longer looking for the escape hatch. Instead I was on a journey to find my place in this industry.

My place turned out to be... well ... *my* place. As I set out to establish my independent financial planning practice out of my own home, I discovered that this is where I was meant to be.

Everything in my life had prepared me for this.

* * *

My chosen recipe is “Chocolate Peanut Butter Balls.” I prefer cooking over baking, probably because baking requires more accuracy in measurement than cooking does. But I have loved these chocolate treats ever since my mom first made them years ago. No one made them better than she did. She was an excellent baker and knew that these chocolate treats were a favourite of mine. My mom was only too eager to share with me half of any batch she made. I savoured each one.

But now that she's gone, the chocolate peanut butter balls have taken on new meaning. I had to discover how to make them. To give them up because my mother is no longer here to make them for me is to dishonour what I learned from her about integrity, perseverance, and love.

I combed through her recipe collection and found some versions of the recipe from which she no doubt based her method. I turned to the Internet to explore even more variations, including some video demonstrations. Finally I came upon what I think most closely matches how my mother made these peanut butter delicacies.

I have made these chocolate peanut butter balls three times now, each time perfecting the method a little more. The recipe I offer is one I believe best replicates the masterpiece that was my mother's.

* * * * *

CHOCOLATE PEANUT BUTTER BALLS

1 cup Kraft Crunchy Peanut Butter
2 cups Rice Krispies
1 cup icing sugar
2 Tbsp (1/4 cup) butter
1 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips

Allow butter to soften at room temperature. Mix butter, peanut butter, Rice Krispies, and icing sugar together until evenly combined. Refrigerate mixture for 1 – 2 hours (cooling the mixture will make it easier to work with).

Place waxed paper over a baking tray. Roll the mixture into balls and place each ball on the tray. Place the tray of balls into the freezer for 2 – 3 hours (again, the frozen state will make the next step easier to complete).

Using a *Bain-Marie* (or double boiler), melt chocolate chips until smooth and syrupy. Never let water, or even the moist steam have contact with the chocolate. I found that using a mixing bowl with a larger diameter than the pot of boiling water works well. Just place the bowl over the pot, and the chocolate melts easily inside the bowl. Cleanup is also easy.

Using two forks, lift each ball and drop into the melted chocolate until completely covered. Lift the covered ball and place onto a baking sheet (covered with wax paper).

Refrigerate finished product.

Makes 20 – 30 balls, depending on the size of each.

[back to top](#)

Debbie: Patience Rewards

Debbie lifted the pan lid and stirred the orange chicken one more time before leaving the skillet on simmer. It was a recipe she spotted on-line. Well, actually it was a picture of a recipe. She studied it and thought of what she had on hand in her pantry. Yes, she concluded, I can make that. Deb's version of the "one-pan orange chicken" was a good choice to serve for the debut of her newly renovated kitchen. Her guests would be arriving soon, bringing dishes of their own to contribute to the inaugural meal.

She took a step back to survey her surroundings. With the touch of the back of her hand, she activated the kitchen sink faucet to rinse out a cup left behind from an afternoon tea break and quickly dispatched it into the dishwasher. This was a kitchen which functioned efficiently and productively. There was no hint left behind of the years of careful planning and hard work, or of the waiting.

Waiting for the right appliance. Waiting for the right fixture. Waiting for the right time to put it together. Piece by piece. Weekend here, weekend there. There wasn't one square foot that wasn't meticulously designed and executed. Indeed, this was a kitchen that had many fine qualities – hidden to all but the most careful of observers.

A light knock at the back door was followed quickly by the entrance of the first wave of arrivals. It was show time!

*

My kitchen renovation was officially complete a few months ago, but this night marked its debut among my dear friends with whom I have shared many meals. When that first knock came to my door, I greeted my guests with hugs and relieved them of their burdens while determining whether a dish was to be placed in the oven, refrigerator or left out at room temperature. Their reaction would soon follow.

"Mmmm, something smells amazing," said the first friend as she worked her way from the entrance to the threshold of the kitchen. "Wow, look at your kitchen!" She added once she was able to take in the whole picture.

"Wait for me," shouted the friend at the back of the bunch, still removing her shoes. "I don't want to miss any grand tours."

I chuckled at the comment. "Grand tour? It's just the kitchen we had redone," I said quietly to the friend standing by my side.

The chatter of the first group of friends all oohing and aahing at the beauty of the décor nearly drowned out the sound of the knock at the door, announcing the second wave of friends.

“We can hear you all the way down the driveway,” said the first one who made it through the door. And right behind her, “Yes, sounds like a kitchen party,” said the next.

I managed to work my way through the tiny throng to make sure each new arrival was attended to, but before I could finish the task, the third and final wave of dinner guests made their entrance.

“Are we late?” said one. “I’m ready for a glass of wine,” said another. But as each entrant finally inched her way through the hellos and hugs of friends, it was the magnificent splendour of a beautiful kitchen that she emerged to see.

“I bet you’re glad that it’s finally done,” one of my guests said to me.

Of course I was glad. This was a project which became a work-in-progress for ten years. It wasn’t ten years of planning and then one month of renovation. It was ten years of making do with unfinished parts. Ten years of living with cut-outs in the walls making way for plumbing and electrical work. Ten years of cooking and baking with my tools spread over poorly located drawers and storage boxes.

And it was ten years of trying to find precious time for Mike and me to work on it. Our daughter, Lauren would be forgiven if she were to mistaken an unfinished kitchen as “normal” considering she grew up during those ten years. And why not? A kitchen-to-be was merely a backdrop in her life, certainly not a barrier to her childhood pursuits. We made sure of it. We supported her violin lessons. We cheered her on while she pitched for her baseball team. We helped her navigate the complexities of post-secondary choices. Mike and I made her our priority.

“Yes, I am,” I sighed. “Now, let’s eat.”

*

In spite of all the commotion made over the centre of attention that was the kitchen, it was not long before it faded into the background as the guests eventually took their places around the dining table to enjoy the delicious meal they had planned for. Story-telling and laughter filled the room – a room where just hours earlier the sole occupant had been the fragrant aromas of a kitchen operating as it was designed to do.

It was nearly imperceptible how main course dishes disappeared from view while desserts with choice of tea or coffee came into being. No one witnessed how it was that their serving dishes, once the vessel transporting their contribution to the meal, were either empty and clean or neatly sealed with plastic wrap to protect a leftover. But the unseen is not to be confused with the non-existent.

*

I sipped my tea and looked around at my guests drinking in the pleasures of good food, good company and lively conversation. Amid the din of voices, I heard the soft clamor at the back door. Mike was home. I rose to greet him and asked, “How was your evening?”

Our private conversation was short-lived as my friends picked up on the new arrival and turned their attention to Mike as he stood with me in the centre of our kitchen.

“Well done,” was the first salvo directed his way, followed by a chorus of “congratulations” mixed with “we love it”.

Mike contributed most of the labour that went into renovating the kitchen, but when asked how he had the patience to endure the years it took to accomplish it, he deferred to me. “Patience is Debbie’s domain, not mine,” he answered.

For one more time, my new kitchen regained the attention of my appreciative guests as they said their goodbyes at the end of an enjoyable evening of dining pleasure. I was very pleased at how well everything went this night and took one last look to see that everything was put away and taken care of before I switched off the kitchen light and headed for bed.

*

In the darkness, the kitchen had all but disappeared, save for the quiet hum of the refrigerator and the soft clicks of the dishwasher on its final drying cycle.

* * *

My recipe choice is “Spicy Sausage Wonton Stars.” I am aware that I have gained a reputation among my friends for my culinary skills. I’m happy to experiment with new dishes, and I’m glad that people like the results.

* * * * *

SPICY SAUSAGE WONTON STARS

These stars can be served hot or at room temperature.

Yield: 3 dozen

1 pound bulk spicy pork sausage
2 medium carrots, finely shredded
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1/2 cup finely chopped sweet red pepper
1/2 cup finely chopped green pepper
1 cup (4 ounces) finely shredded pepper Jack cheese
1 cup (4 ounces) finely shredded cheddar cheese
1/2 cup sour cream
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon lemon-pepper seasoning
36 wonton wrappers
1 tablespoon butter, melted
1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
Sliced cherry tomatoes, optional

1. In a large skillet, cook sausage over medium heat until no longer pink, drain. In a large bowl, combine the sausage, carrots, onion, peppers, cheeses, sour cream, garlic and lemon-pepper.
2. Press wonton wrappers into miniature muffin cups coated with cooking spray. In a small bowl, combine butter and garlic powder; brush over edges. Bake at 350 F for 8 - 9 minutes or until lightly browned.
3. Spoon sausage mixture into cups. Bake 5 - 7 minutes longer or until heated through. Garnish with tomatoes if desired.

[back to top](#)

Us: How We Combine

Now that each of us has told her story, there is another one to tell. It's the story of "us." What recipe of life was at work to produce our collective friendship that we now hold so dear?

Reaching back in time to recollect how we came to know one another can be a complex task, as complex as tracing a family history. In many ways, we are the product of a series of friendships forged throughout our childhood, often as easily as saying, "My name is Karen. What's your name?" So, from Karen and Carol in Kindergarten to Gloria in Grade Nine and everyone in between, we were simply making new friends. In high school, we did not all move in unison in our course selection nor in our choices of sports, clubs, and activities. Our social lives sometimes overlapped but just as often they diverged. During our senior year, we were showing signs of convergence as we collected at the same cafeteria table to eat our lunch together and share our day's events. By graduation, we began to feel the bond of friendship amongst us. But we could not have foreseen then that this bond would remain even forty years later.

After graduation, most of us began working, and some continued into post-secondary education. Barb, who had been dating Wally for a number of years, was ready for marriage within a year of high school graduation. Her best friend, Cathy M, threw her a bridal shower and invited many high school friends, which included most of us.

Then Laurel, who had been dating Norm for even longer, was ready for marriage a year after that. Her friend Hazel threw her a bridal shower and invited many of the same friends.

There were bridal showers happening with enough frequency that we may have fallen into a bit of a routine with them. But what's noteworthy is that we were becoming aware of two important things: One, we liked the activity of getting together, each contributing a dish to share. And two, there was a pattern of the same particular friends gathering.

At some point back then, we had made the conscious and deliberate choice of getting together for "potluck" dinners, on a regular basis. In those early years, there tended to be two types of potluck – shower and regular. At "shower" potlucks, we threw bridal or baby showers as the theme of our potluck. On those rare occasions – when no one had

announced a wedding or pregnancy – we had “regular” potlucks. With 10 weddings and 19 children among us, there was a long stretch of time when it became standard fare that during coffee and dessert, someone would say, “I have an announcement to make.” To this day, it seems we cannot say that sentence without an outburst of laughter at our inside joke.

Today, we continue to meet for these dinners, and have since included many trips and weekend getaways. Whenever we travel as a group, we’ll get at least one or two comments from strangers about how “amazed” they are at the longevity of our group friendship. We may not have thought about it at first, but as time marched on, and similar comments piled up, we came to see and appreciate it too.

And there’s a lot to appreciate. Among us, we have all experienced the helping hand, the cheering support, the shoulder to cry on, the companion to talk to, the talents to draw on, the wisdom for sharing and the goodwill overall. We are ever comforted in the knowledge that we are there for one another whether it is to celebrate a festive occasion, grieve the loss of a loved one, or just help an injured friend complete a household task.

We are individuals, each with different life experience, different interests, and different strengths, but our friendship together is a story of its own. And like a potluck dinner, we are the individual dishes, which combine to create what we affectionately call our *potluck group*.

* * * * *

POTLUCK GROUP

- * Karen
- * Carol
- * Dianne
- * Hazel
- * Cathy O
- * Debbie
- * Barb
- * Cathy M
- * Christine
- * Laurel

* Gloria

Start by mixing together Karen and Carol in a Kindergarten room. Combine these with Dianne and Hazel together in a Grade One class. Use a Grade Three classroom to stir in Cathy O and combine all these with Debbie in the same Grade Five classroom.

After Grade Six, divide mixture into three schools. Set aside Dianne for Grade Seven and Eight. Add Barb, Cathy M, and Christine to Cathy O's new school and add Laurel to the school of the remaining ingredients.

Combine the three schools of ingredients together into the same high school and for extra flavour, add Gloria to the mix.

Once blended, the Potluck Group can be served immediately or stored for future occasions. Travel sized portions are easily accommodated. Use this mixture – or any combination within – when in need for some of life's nourishing wisdom.

Serve with wine for an even richer experience.

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[back to top](#)

Recipe Index

[APPETIZER OF THE HOUR](#)

[BANANA SPLIT](#)

[CEVICHE DE CAMARON: SHRIMP CEVICHE “COCKTAIL”](#)

[CHOCOLATE PEANUT BUTTER BALLS](#)

[CHOCOLATE QUINOA CAKE](#)

[GLORIA’S BASIC PASTA SAUCE](#)

[HOT CRAB/SHRIMP DIP](#)

[MOM’S ICE CREAM PIE](#)

[ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLE SALAD](#)

[SPICY SAUSAGE WONTON STARS](#)

[YELLOW SPLIT PEA SOUP](#)

[back to top](#)